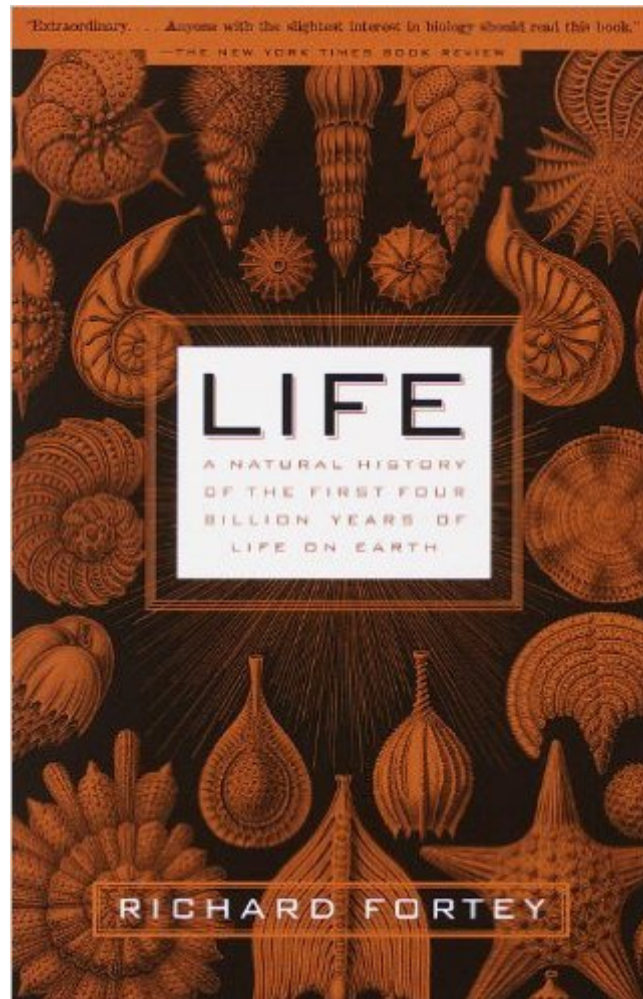


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Life: A Natural History Of The First Four Billion Years Of Life On Earth



Synopsis

A New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice "Extraordinary. . . . Anyone with the slightest interest in biology should read this book."--The New York Times Book Review "A marvelous museum of the past four billion years on earth--capacious, jammed with treasures, full of learning and wide-eyed wonder."--The Boston Globe From its origins on the still-forming planet to the recent emergence of Homo sapiens--one of the world's leading paleontologists offers an absorbing account of how and why life on earth developed as it did. Interlacing the tale of his own adventures in the field with vivid descriptions of creatures who emerged and disappeared in the long march of geologic time, Richard Fortey sheds light upon a fascinating array of evolutionary wonders, mysteries, and debates. Brimming with wit, literary style, and the joy of discovery, this is an indispensable book that will delight the general reader and the scientist alike. "A drama bolder and more sweeping than *Gone with the Wind* . . . a pleasure to read."--Science "A beautifully written and structured work . . . packed with lucid expositions of science."--Natural History

Book Information

Paperback: 400 pages

Publisher: Vintage (September 7, 1999)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 037570261X

ISBN-13: 978-0375702617

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.8 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (74 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #410,053 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #178 in [Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Paleontology](#) #418 in [Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Natural History](#) #2011 in [Books > Science & Math > Evolution](#)

Customer Reviews

The title of this book, "Life: A natural history of four billion years of life on Earth," was a great selling point for me. As an invertebrate zoologist I have an ongoing interest in learning more about where life came from, how it is interrelated, and how and when the diversity of life around us came into being. Of course, no one has definitive explanations for those kinds of topics, but I was looking forward to reading Fortey's views on the natural history of life. As I began reading I soon became disillusioned with Fortey's approach. If he wanted to write his autobiography, wedged in here and

there among his main topic, why in the world didn't he tip off the reader by having a better subtitle? I did press on and complete the book, and found it to have meaningful content and thought-provoking ideas, but after all was said and done I was left wanting. Fortey deserves commendation for undertaking such a massive topic, in 322pp no less! As I read through his account in search of information that would provide me with a clue to the framework he uses to understand the natural history of life on earth, I felt like I hit speed bump after speed bump in the form of occasionally interesting, but often meaningless, diversions. I'm sorry, but I could really care less, for example, what a hotel traditionally frequented by paleontologists serves for breakfast, or Fortey's personal reflections on Australian ponds where "the jolly swagman rested his tuckerbag"! Don't get me wrong, those are wonderful literary side steps in this largely scientific work, but for me they were only distractions rather than useful contributions to the work. Fortey does do a great job in some areas...

It's hard to imagine a more ambitious project than writing a natural history of the first four billion years of life on earth. It's even harder to imagine writing it for the interested layperson without making too many oversimplifications or leaving out too much important detail in a book with just over 300 pages. Richard Fortey has risen to the occasion though, and in the process has created a book that's engaging and highly worth reading. You might expect a book like this to be mechanistic, starting at the beginning and cranking by rote through the sequence of events that constitute the earth's history. Fortey doesn't do this. In a cordial and poetic style he first introduces us to the real world of paleontology. A world of dirt, grime and fierce winds on forsaken beaches bordering forgotten islands of the far north. This is where Fortey began his career, and where he made a first mark in the study of extinct organisms from earth's ancient past. This first chapter is important because it reminds us that our knowledge of earth's history has come in fitful starts in which chance and luck have played a central roll. Only a fraction of all creatures leave fossilized remains, only a fraction of those are ever found, and even then they must be interpreted through the preconceptions of scientists. The miracle is that we know anything at all - but we do, and what a story it is. Having introduced the working of paleontology, Fortey devotes the second chapter to the origin of the first life forms. This chapter is of necessity the most barren of all. We still don't understand the origin of life, though there have been remarkable strides in recent years.

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